

BOOST TO PLAIN PACKAGING

Relevant for: Health, Education & Human Resources | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

This year, Thailand and Saudi Arabia will join a growing club of nations introducing plain packaging of tobacco products. They are the first in the Asian and Arab regions, respectively, to adopt the tough measure in order to curb tobacco consumption — from September in Thailand, and May 1 in Saudi Arabia's case

In December 2012, Australia became the first country to introduce plain packaging following the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) guidelines. It has also been implemented in France and the United Kingdom (both 2016), Norway and Ireland (both 2017) and New Zealand and Hungary (both 2018). It will be implemented in Uruguay (2019) and Slovenia (2020). The move is under process or being considered in 14 more countries.

Plain packaging standardises the appearance of tobacco products. Other than brand and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style, it prohibits the use of logos, colours, brand images or promotional information. Besides increasing the effectiveness of health warnings, the idea is to reduce the attractiveness of tobacco products, with no scope for using packaging to advertise and promote consumption.

Understandably, the tobacco industry was opposed to Australia's plain packaging initiative. But the ruling by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in June 2018, favouring plain packaging, has struck a blow against the tobacco industry. The WTO panel, while rejecting the notion that Australia had unjustifiably infringed tobacco trademarks and violated intellectual property rights, said the plain packaging law led to "improving public health by reducing use of and exposure to tobacco products".

With the legal hurdle to tobacco control being cleared, one is optimistic that countries, including India, which were undecided, can take steps to introduce similar legislation. In India, tobacco is the cause of about one million deaths annually.

In April 2016, India increased the size of graphic pictorial warnings, by 85%, on the packaging of tobacco products (both front and back). The percentage of users in India who thought of quitting because of such warning labels increased sharply to 62% (cigarette), 54% (bidi) and 46% (smokeless tobacco users), according to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey 2016-2017, when compared with the survey results of 2009-2010. Likewise, tobacco use among those aged 15-24 years showed a six-percentage point reduction (18.4% in 2009-10 to 12.4% in 2016-17). The number of tobacco users dropped by eight million.

Along with higher taxes and large pictorial warnings, plain packaging can serve as a tool to deter new users and prompt existing users to quit. Here is the proof: plain packaging along with other measures led to 0.55 percentage point reduction in smoking prevalence in Australia, translating into at least 1,18,000 fewer smokers.

The writer is the Science Editor of The Hindu

It is time to make victim impact statements mandatory

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